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ABSTRACT

In theatrical production, skillful design is effective communication. A study of audience response to nine drama settings gives positive evidence that the successful designer creates "signposts and symbols" that communicate instantaneously to the observer. The setting is a message. All of the scenic elements must be unified in a clear and concise way. Although realism is the most popular style for the learning designer, it is not always effective in conveying the overt or underlying messages of the playwright. Realism is the most difficult style to do well, because it requires significant knowledge of the drama itself and a background in art in order to make the proper selection of the most communicative tint or motif. Therefore, beginners should concentrate effort on developing an appreciation of abstract art, as well as probing the other styles of scenic design. (MAI)

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# COMMUNICATION VS REALISM FOR THE LEARNING DESIGNER

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Communication vs Realism for the Learning Designer

Recent empirical evidence has begun to suggest that skill as a communicator is among the designer's most valuable means for achieving a successfully received production. Among the most popular styles of scenic production, particularly with the learning designer, has been the realistic setting (nazardous definition: the accurate depiction of an actual or potential physical environment as controlled by artistic considerations). However, scenically, realism is too often an ineffective theatrical style of production, not from its numerous physical and aesthetic encumbrances, but because realistic settings impose strict limitations on the act of scene design as a form of communication, especially for the beginning designer.

Introduction.

Clearly, from the time of Simonson's tenets brought forth in The Stage Is Set theatre audiences have witnessed a solid effort on the part of scene designers to convey the overt or underlying messages of the playwright. Indeed, the communication of a play's meaning has become a highly collaborative endeavor among all key practitioners including the various production designers. Frequently, for slightly stylized settings a designer can express relevant aspects of the play through somewhat subtle means, the turn of certain architectural forms for Menotti's The Unicorn, for example, or the roughness of a particular texture for Oedipus, The King. Rather less frequently, the designer has opportunity to implant on the stage a literal symbol which may speak directly to the spectators in visual terms, such as Nazi flags with a cauliflower emblem, as possible in the final scene of Brecht's The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui. However with realism, the

methods of communication are confined and convoluted to the extent that the style is best left to the designer of considerable experience. The use of color or historical decor, for instance, requires significant breadth and depth of knowledge in order to make the proper selection for the most communicative visual tint or motiff. Yet, the first attempts of many young designers too often involve the accurate representation of the specific environment suggested in the play with only secondary considerations given to the dramatic concerns; i.e., the presentation of a realistic setting with little regard for--or perhaps understanding of--the communicative process. A starting designer might, for example, become embroiled in the precise depiction of a decayed saloon in the late 1930's of the San Francisco waterfront rather than focus on the communication of the bitter enchantment found in the atmosphere of Saroyan's play, The Time of Your Life.

Design as Communication.

Empirical research in theatre is a continually developing field of study, one which affords the scene designer with the beginnings of a more accurate understanding of the importance of precise communication to his/her audience. In Designing for the Theatre Jo Mielziner notes, "The designer must create signposts and symbols, clues and innuendos, that will communicate instantly to the audience."[1] We must first ask ourselves if indeed the designer's communication does affect the audience, and, secondly, how we cultivate that skill.

Evidence has been produced by this researcher[2] which suggests there exists a positive relationship between the agreement (compatibility) of a scene designer and the audience in their responses to a theatrical setting and the degree of preference by the audience for the setting. That

is, the results of an investigation of audience responses to nine settings found that audiences preferred those sets with which they most agreed with the designer on a Semantic Differential (S.D.) scale. Although the research primarily set out to examine reactions of theatre audiences (expert and non-expert) to settings with the use of the S.D., a definite pattern emerged from the results between the S.D. and preference responses of the audience members. For those settings to which there was a high degree of audience preference, there also existed a high degree of agreement semantically between audience groups. Conversely, those settings that produced little agreement semantically between audiences also tended to receive low audience ratings on the preference scales. For instance, if the designer did indeed create"signposts and symbols" that communicated instantaneously to the audience, the audience preferred the setting. The communication was clear and concise and therefore effective. On the other hand, when the "signposts and signals" were not communicated clearly and concisely the settings tended to be liked less, even disliked, by the audience. Therefore, as this research suggests good communication is regarded by the audience in its appreciation of the stage setting; or, stated in another way, <u>successful designing is effective communication</u>.

With the participation of five university theatres further empirical exploration is now in progress into the relationship between the level of semantic agreement by designer and audience and the level of preference for the settings. The outcome of such a relationship seems to be associated with the designer's ability to unify scenic elements into a communicative tool; i.e., if a setting is well defined as a "message," then it is in turn well appreciated. Since the theatrical setting functions as the means

by which the designer communicates, the most viable relationship for investigation appears to be that of designer and audience. The degree of semantic agreement between the designer and audience may offer a precise indication of how effectively the designer communicates.

Limitations of Realism.

A realistic presentation of a dramatic environment is rather common in the American realm of entertainment, though far less so in the performing arts. As indicated in the introduction, realism is ironically both the most complex style with which to communicate the meaning of a play and also the style to which design students are most readily inclined. Two major reasons may contribute to this latter phenomenon.

First, for most young designers, their initial exposure to scenic style consists of varying degrees of realism. Indeed, through television and cinema, our developing designers are virtually inundated by the hour with that single form of scenic presentation. From the taped sit-com replete with live audience to the filmed action cop show, from the disaster movie to the foreign flick, with few exceptions the student learns his/her visual vocabulary in realistic terms. Unless otherwise exposed with regularity to theatre, dance or opera, the student is predisposed to realism before entering the scene design classroom. As a result realism is often unquestionably viewed as the most acceptable form of scenography.

Despite its frequent appearance, however, realism may not always be the most impressive style of presentation, as indicated by the results of a thesis in progress by Thomas Bowman, University of Illinois, Chicago Circle. In an attempt to identify differences in audience reactions to three modes of performance (Live Theatre, Television Studio and Videotape

Theatre) and two styles of production (Realistic and Abstract), Bowman found that the Live Theatre/Abstract version of performance was considered by the audience the most preferable and the most active of the six combinations. Surprisingly, the Television/Realistic version was the least preferred and the least active of all treatments. In fact, the Abstract style was rated more active in all modes than the Realistic style. So, although some designers may initially select to work in a realistic fashion, the choice may not be the most dynamic option regardless of the mode of presentation, least of all theatre.

A second contributing factor to the beginning design student's attraction with realism may be found in various psychological studies. Research has shown that abstract art is difficult for the initiate to comprehend at first exposure; hence, the drift toward realism. Considerable research in psychology and visual perception has indicated that non-artists--and adolescents--prefer representational art over abstract art. The artists or experts, on the other hand, consistently display strong preferences for abstract art while maintaining a mild tolerance for the representative forms. Such findings were described in a report by E.A. Peel.[3] Woods and Boudreau revealed similar results with the additional finding that the older, artistic groups of subjects were more sensative to and aware of complex designs.[4] In a study of art evaluation by Donald Gordon laymen preferred realistic paintings and perceived them on the basis of their content or representational depiction.[5] Experts tended to judge paintings according to their type or style with no particular preferences. James Rawls and Gordon Slack also found significant differences between groups both in quantitative measurements and qualitative interpretation of reactions

to Rorschach Ink Blot Tests.[6] Generally, they found artists displayed a more pronounced tolerance for loosely connected but associated content in paintings than did the non-artists. If an analogy may be drawn between the non-artist subjects of the studies cited above and the learning designers it supports and partially explains their tendency toward representational work at the outset.

An important study of artists and non-artists by T.W. Tucker also explains why abstract forms are not initially well liked by laymen but are still aesthetically influential. He attempted to examine semantically laymen's apparent distaste for abstract art.[7] Tucker found that laymen did not necessarily dislike absract art but merely had no internal linguistic frame of reference by which to evaluate it. Conversely, they exhibited a strong preference for naturalism, because naturalism provided them with a ready frame of reference. These findings suggest that novice designers (and non-theatre going audiences) do not carry with them an innate apprehension toward abstract design but rather lack an understanding or knowledge of the styles. These findings imply that appreciation for scenic forms other than realism can be readily taught and learned, perhaps both in the classroom and the theatre. Bowman's study, for that matter, has already shown the vital influence a non-realistic theatrical production can have on an audience and, in turn, the designer.

Realism, then, is not only a less effective method of communication for the beginning artist, but also not necessarily the most viable and challenging stimulus for the audience, though sometimes the most popular. That is not to say realism is a less creative approach to scenography;

the point has been made that the style requires considerable expertise if it is to be handled in a communicative manner. The problem presented with a new student's inclination toward a realistic rendering of a setting is the inordinate concentration invested in the representation of the visual necessities at the cost of the establishment, the development and the refinement of the artistic communication.

NOTES

1. Jo Mielziner, Designing for the Theatre (New York: Antheneum, 1965), p.18.

2. George Caldwell, "Scene Design and Audience Analysis," paper delivered to American Theatre Association Convention, Los Angeles, 1976.

3. E.A. Peel, "On Identifying Aesthetic Types," The British Journal of Psychology, XXXV, Pt. 3 (May, 1945), 61-69.

4. Walter A. Woods and James C. Boudreau, "Design Complexity as a Determiner of Visual Attention Among Artists and Non-Artists," Journal of Applied Psychology, 34, No. 5 (1950), 355-62.

5. Donald A. Gordon, "The Artistic Excellence of Oil Paintings, As Judged by Experts and Laymen," Journal of Educational Research, XLVIII, No. 8 (April, 1955), 579-88.

6. James R. Rawls and Gordon K. Slack, "Artists Versus Non-artists: Rorschach Determinants and Artistic Creativity," Journal of Projective Techniques and Personality Assessment, 32, No. 3 (1968), 233-37.

7. Charles E. Osgood, George J. Succi, and Percy H. Tannenbaum, The Measurement of Meaning (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), p.292.